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Dubowitz, Daniel ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9179-2426> and Dunn, Nick (2018) Dark Inscriptions: placing theory and tracing practice in nocturnal Glasgow. Writing place Journal for Architecture & Literature 2: Inscriptions: Tracing Place (2). pp. 81-97. ISSN 2589-7683

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Version: Published Version

Publisher: Nai010

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7480/writingplace.2.2641>

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Dark Inscriptions: Placing Theory and Tracing Practice in Nocturnal Glasgow

Nick Dunn and Dan Dubowitz

Rewriting the City

In this paper we explore the notion of writing to go beyond the literary act and offer a frame for rethinking how we make cities. As urban designers, we are interested in how to include different methods with which to explore a new inscriptive practice for authoring the city in relation to three key questions. Firstly, how can authorship be used as a form of writing *through* rather than of the site? Experiencing urban space first-hand goes beyond literature, affording people a sense of ownership and connection to place. Secondly, how can this spatial practice provide the basis for collective authoring of possible futures for the city based on this new understanding? Finally, how can this inscriptive practice be formulated to enable the people in a neighbourhood to become active and activating participants in remaking the city?

In order to do this, we draw upon our recent *Collaborative Urbanism* practice in the Scottish city of Glasgow, UK, to explore the ongoing dialogue between practice and theory in relation to city making. To contextualize our approach, we will discuss how different creative practices have written the city's narrative to date, including photography, urban planning and literature. We then describe our action research of collective walking at night as a method to open up creative dialogues with the denizens of Glasgow about the city's places and their future uses. To understand the perspective our practice is based on, we first define the key terminology we are using. In the context of this paper, we employ the term *authorship* in its broader definition to describe the state of creating or causing effect, specifically the sense of ownership and activation resulting from engaging directly with urban space. By the term *inscriptive practice*, we are referring to the action of a spatial practice that leads to authorship, i.e. we use collective walking as a means of inscribing urban space.

Collaborative Urbanism is an alternative approach to designing and making cities that the authors are developing and delivering in the UK. A significant challenge that this emerging practice seeks to address is the need for an effective and authentic method for communities and professionals to come together to co-create new public realm. This project is based in the post-industrial city of Glasgow but there are many other similar situations in the UK and around the world. This new approach to involving residents in regeneration enables people to develop authorship of their city, giving them a sense of ownership of sites that have become lost to public use. This sense of ownership and belonging can then lead to people in a neighbourhood taking action and engaging in activism to shape a place's future.¹ The *inscriptive practice* we use to develop this authorship is collective night walking, which provides a method to bring people together and see the city differently. We will explain the significance and relevance of night walking later in this paper. The physical context for our *Collaborative Urbanism* practice in Glasgow is an area of the city that was radically altered through Mod-

ernist post-war transformation. Specifically, we are working in and around parts of the city dominated by the elevated M8 motorway, which physically and psychologically severed the city centre in two, disconnecting previously adjacent neighbourhoods. To conclude, we discuss our findings so far and their implications to better understand how we can work with the people of a city to read its secrets and collectively author its future.

The Secret City

I was struck by the contrast between the austere solidity of the nineteenth-century buildings, the long high rows of tenement flats, as they are called, and the abject meanness of the wide empty streets I was walking through. There were patches of weed-strewn waste ground mouldering with fires, metal-shuttered shop fronts as if ready to repel a siege, abundant litter, wheel-less abandoned vehicles, graffiti – often of a virulent sectarian religious kind – and, when I encountered the odd person out and about at this early hour, a feeling of alarm. I felt I was an alien in an alien land.²

The above description is an account of Glasgow in the 1970s by William Boyd as part of his preface for a volume of photographs by Raymond Depardon taken in the city between 1980 and 1982. One of the key aspects of the city he is keen to emphasize is that it has a special quality wherein, despite the extensive regeneration of this post-industrial landscape that has occurred across the last few decades, it is still entirely possible to turn a corner and experience the twenty-first century vanishing, replaced by 'rainwashed streets of an older Glasgow . . . as if the nineteenth century has somehow returned'.³ There is an important point regarding the photographs taken by Depardon that further highlights the lesser-known city of Glasgow revealed in his work. He was commissioned by *The Sunday Times* in 1980 to photograph the city for a feature on overlooked tourist destinations in Europe. However, rather than taking images of the grand Victorian boulevards or the city's fashionable neighbourhoods, Depardon documented the harsh realities of Calton, Govan, the Gorbals and Maryhill. He deliberately

avoided the trap of exoticism and instead found widespread evidence of a strong community spirit within difficult urban conditions. Given that this showed an entirely different version of the city, and certainly not that which had been commissioned, his reportage remained unpublished until 2016.⁴

Writing about the city in 1960, the architectural critic Ian Nairn was certainly surprised by what he discovered, 'Glasgow was a shock to me Instead I found what is without doubt the most friendly of Britain's big cities, and probably the most dignified and coherent as well.'⁵ Although the city was beset with many socio-economic issues and a significant amount of its population lived difficult, hard lives, Nairn was struck by the underlying social qualities and strong sense of community he found, '[a]ny Glasgow walk is inflected by a multitude of human contacts – in shops, under umbrellas (there is a good deal of rain in Glasgow), even from policemen – and each of them seems to be a person-to-person recognition, not the mutual hate of cogs in a machine who know their plight but cannot escape it.'⁶ However, his view on the city would change, and in a postscript written in 1967 he was far less positive, hinting at the impending mass disruption that was about to radically reshape the city and its neighbourhoods, '[n]othing of outstanding value has yet gone but this, I think, is only an accident: there are some fearsome road proposals and fearsome rehousing proposals for what are undoubtedly fearsome problems.'⁷

Nairn's concerns for Glasgow principally referred to the mass clearance of neighbourhoods and tenements to build transport and housing, a process well underway by 1967. This re-imagining of the city had first been proposed by Robert Bruce in the *First Planning Report to the Highways and Planning Committee of the Corporation of the City of Glasgow* of 1945. Comprising plans, drawings and a strategy, the report set out a brave new future for the city that would demolish and replace the existing Victorian city with a Modernist vision. Although it was not implemented fully, the report's findings and recommendations heralded the direction for an intensive

programme of regeneration and rebuilding of the city-region between the mid-1950s and the late 1970s. In a subsequent report, *A Plan for Glasgow*, by Civil Engineers Scott Kirkpatrick & Partners between 1960 and 1965, drawings by Alan Bell (Figs. 1a, b & c) gave a vision for how the future city would look, even though this work predated the actual motorway design of 1965-1972.

In place of slums and poor urban fabric, this new city promised streets in the sky, a motorway that could bring people directly into the city centre and significantly lower-density housing with vast new areas of public space for people to share and live out their public life. This vision for a new city of Glasgow became a lost future as the construction of the elevated section of the M8 motorway between 1968 and 1972 immediately divided the city into two halves, forming a barrier to movement between them (Figs. 2 a, b & c). Being elevated above much of its immediate context on a concrete viaduct significantly contributed to its megastructural qualities. Adding to its dominance in the urban fabric, this section of the M8 has remained one of the busiest river crossings in Europe at the Kingston Bridge, which in conjunction with its several pedestrian overpasses, adjoining arterial roads, slip roads and several incomplete constructions has rewritten the city in a way unimaginable to the city engineer who authored the original report.⁸ Far from the clean, mobile, and green future envisaged, this part of the city is noisy and unwelcoming, and the promise of significant public realm as sites for interaction, play and social intimacy quickly evaporated as spaces were huge, windswept and far from human in scale, whilst signs prohibiting ball games or to keep off the grass adorned its surfaces.

Over 40 years later, the area underneath and around the elevated M8 motorway section in Glasgow is unquestionably challenging and not obviously inviting to the residents of the city. Prior to discussing how our inscriptive practice seeks to put people at the heart of authoring a new public realm, it is helpful to understand how various literary materials have written and



Fig. 1a. Proposed inner city layout centring on a motorway in the sky, Alan Bell for Scott Kirkpatrick & Partners on behalf of Glasgow City Council, 1965.

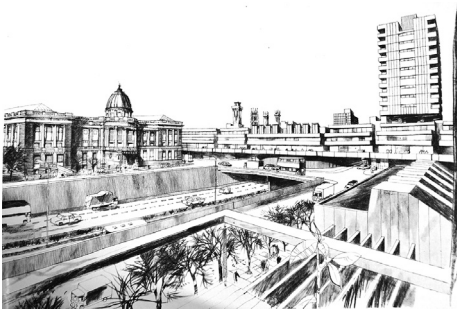


Fig. 1b. View of the existing Mitchell Library in relation to a new vision for the city, with its deep-cut six-lane motorway, Alan Bell for Scott Kirkpatrick & Partners on behalf of Glasgow City Council, 1965.

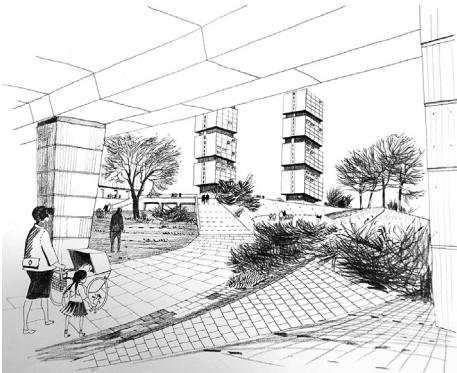


Fig. 1c. Perspective view from an underpass to connect the two sides of the city separated by the motorway. This vision of a hard-landscaped multi-level ramped public realm with modern tower blocks is similar to what was built, but without the pedestrian activity, Alan Bell for Scott Kirkpatrick & Partners on behalf of Glasgow City Council, 1965.
all images © Glasgow Museums and Libraries Collection.



Figs. 2 a, b & c. Aerial photographs showing demolition of Glasgow city centre and the construction of M8 motorway. © Glasgow City Council, photographer unknown, circa 1971.

rewritten the city's narrative to date. Therefore, in the next section we turn our attention to some of the literary depictions of Glasgow to draw out some key themes that inform our practice-based work.

Finding Place within Literature and Memory of a City's Shadows

One of the noticeable and enduring themes in literary descriptions, whether biographical or fictional, is Glasgow as a nocturnal city. Whether presented as the context for real-life hardship, narrative or providing a protagonist in the work, the shadowy world of the city as daylight recedes is key to a number of important memories and re-imaginings. From an autobiographical perspective both Molly Weir's *Shoes Were For Sundays* (1970) and Robert Douglas' *Night Song of the Last Tram* (2005) share detailed reconstructions of the typically crepuscular, decrepit and claustrophobic living conditions for many of the city's working class.⁹ They also celebrate the strong community spirit amongst the city's neighbourhoods and in the latter case, set in post-war Glasgow, illustrate that many aspects of the city, despite large-scale demolition and rebuilding, have not necessarily disappeared, thus reminding us that history does not easily withdraw but has a tendency to return.

The portraits of the city as depicted in fiction appear to strongly correlate with such biographical accounts. *No Mean City*, published in 1935 and set in the 1920s Glasgow slums, gives grim insights into working-class life in the city at the time. So visceral in its evocation of place was it that Glasgow libraries were banned from stocking it and the city's bookshops refused to sell it when first published, due to its raw and negative portrayal of the city.¹⁰ Of greater relevance to our research is Glasgow as a city of darkness as depicted in Alasdair Gray's 1981 novel *Lanark*, subtitled *A Life in Four Books*.¹¹ Written over a period of 30 years, the story blends realist and dystopian surrealist portrayals of the city and is inventive in the sequencing of its format, as its four books are presented in the order of Three, One, Two and then Four. Book Three is of particular interest in this context, as

the protagonist arrives in Unthank, a strange Glasgow-like city where there is no daylight. It also highlights one of the important strengths of literature in how it can deal with non-linear time, an aspect we are interested in from an urban design perspective, as it can account for nuance and complexity when reading and writing place. It also reminds us of the dual identity of the daytime and nocturnal city, conjoined and overlaid yet also offset from one another in their atmospheres, ambiances and sensory experiences.

More recent literary fiction set in the city further consolidates the idea of Glasgow as a city of darkness within which fresh perspectives on place can be authored, such as James Kelman's *How Late It Was, How Late* (1994) or Louise Welsh's *The Cutting Room* (2002).¹² In both novels, the authors' feel for the Glaswegian cityscape of the secret and the dark is rendered sharp and precise through their respective protagonists' navigation through the underworld that is somehow always just around the corner or below the surface of the façades and streets that are so familiar to its denizens. The nocturnal city of Glasgow has also provided a vital time-place for various crime fiction authors writing about the city, for whom the coexistence of light and dark is distinct in its ability to frame events, 'The light in Scotland is low in the autumn, gracing even the most mundane objects with dramatic chiaroscuro. Deep hard shadows from the tall buildings fell across the streets, litter bins stood on the pavement like war monuments . . .'¹³

It is evident that Glasgow has been built and rebuilt time and time again through literary practice to provide evocations of its specific atmospheres, histories and memories. This mirrors the history of the construction of the city in reality and its subsequent reconstructions following the demolition of the medieval town, the first Victorian city and then the second Victorian city to build the Modernist city. As set out at the beginning of this paper, we are interested in the notion of authorship as a way of writing place through the inscriptive practice of collective walking in parts of Glasgow that connect with city regeneration areas. The key shift is the move from a professional

and client-centred city-making process toward a new, inclusive and collective approach to authoring the city anew, centred on people living and working in an area. To better understand how collective walking might achieve this, in the next section we examine the relationship between walking and writing as a means of understanding and transforming the reciprocity between the body and the city.

Tracing Theory Between Walking and Writing

The stories that we tell matter because they indicate how we see the world, and whether we believe we have the power and capacity to shape it for the better. Stories are one of the main ways that we make sense of the world, and understand and interpret our lives and experiences. Stories and engaging with people's imagination are potentially a powerful way to open up the futures of cities in democratic and creative ways.¹⁴

But who writes those stories? *The Dreaming City* project by Demos, 2007, sought to engage Glasgow *through* stories and storytelling to provoke thinking about the future. Whilst there was a wealth of powerful and often positive narratives that emerged from the project, in drawing its conclusions it noted the need for 'finding new ways to mobilise communities of interest and action behind those storylines. It demands developing new patterns of participation and new patterns of producing collective goods.'¹⁵ This is where our *Collaborative Urbanism* approach seems fitting, as it seeks to find a form of inscriptive practice that enables a different type of authorship *through* rather than of the site. Earlier, we explained that inscriptive practice in our work refers to a spatial practice, specifically walking. More than simply a way of moving around cities, walking offers temporal and multi-sensory qualities that also enable it to provide a process of discovery and revelation since 'the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers.'¹⁶ Such a process is reciprocal, as the body in turn is informed by its interaction with and experience *through* space, which means we activate space as we move through it but it also stimu-

lates us into action in doing so. For Elizabeth Grosz, the city is understood as 'a reflection, projection or product of bodies', an exchange and mutuality that directs us toward the '(re-) finding and (re-) situating' of the body within the city.¹⁷

This reciprocal relationship between bodies and space reminds us that the latter is a living entity in its own right, not a neutral container or passive background, which suggests we need to develop a practice that can collectively engage with urban space via movement through it. The relationship between walking and writing has been the subject of discourse, practices and counter-histories (Careri, 2002; Gros, 2014; Elkin, 2016).¹⁸ Much contemporary walking as a creative practice in cities has been evolved from the Situationist practice of *dérive* and it is worth noting that Glaswegians have their own word for it – a 'daunder'.¹⁹ Whilst we are keen to develop a form of authorship through direct experience of place, for which walking is ideal, the notion of how we can see the city anew suggested the practice of night walking, which 'turn(s) the day's continuum into a theatre of tableaux, vignettes, set pieces . . .'.²⁰ Given the rich seam of literature concerning Glasgow as a nocturnal city, it seemed logical to explore the sites with the city's people at night. Night walking may be understood as an inscriptive practice, offering new experiences of place that foster a different way of thinking as 'its rhythms are incantations, finding the fissures of urban space and loosening them up, bringing forth seizures of place.'²¹ However, we are also interested in what night walking offers as a practice of collective movement through space and how this mobile method enables us to author the city by giving people a sense of ownership of sites in a part of the city that has become lost to public use.

Narrative Afoot – Authoring the City Through Collective Movement

Our action research area addresses the aftermath of the Modernist project to drive a motorway through the heart of Glasgow in the 1960s. Even though this is the centre of a vibrant city, the spaces above, alongside and below this megastructure have been rendered inhospitable for so long by



Fig. 3. 'Walkway to nowhere' rediscovered by Glaswegians on a collective night walk in Glasgow, 5 December 2017.



Fig. 4. Underpass built as envisioned in 1965 concept sketches without the footfall and connectivity, Glasgow, 5 December 2017.



Fig. 5. 'Secret garden' discovered during a collective night walk in Glasgow, 5 December 2017.
all images © Dan Dubowitz.

the motorway that they have become a lost part of the city. In contrast to the drawings envisioning Glasgow's public realm of the future as depicted in the 1960s, few people know these spaces, let alone care for them.

The sociopolitical context for this approach is that as architects we find ourselves in the UK with a culture and society that by and large is not actively engaged with transforming its cities, compared with our European counterparts. Furthermore, the instruments we currently have available to us as architects, urban designers, planners, developers and local government, from writing briefs and developing designs to planning permissions and the way construction is delivered on a city scale, are not working for people in the city. Too often people living in a neighbourhood have the sense that city-scale regeneration projects are being done to them or in spite of them, rather than with them. The outcome is that people feel disconnected from what is made.

Our collaborative practice focuses on rethinking how we make cities by developing new ways of working on city-scale regeneration projects. This is done to both inscribe spaces with new meanings and to author places through ongoing active engagement. We understand these two elements as reciprocal and have set out to explore them in tandem through practice. Parallel to Glasgow City Council's *Avenues* project, which aims to remake key streets people-centred – rather than car-focused – in the city between 2018-2024, we have been involving people from all walks of life in collective night walks. Our hypothesis is founded on two premises. Firstly, the act of walking through space is active and inscriptive in itself. Secondly, having inscribed it and enacted it, these places are opened up to a dialogue that can be built upon for future uses.

The interim findings of collective walks through supposedly hostile spaces that feel noisier at night due to variations in sound levels, despite not actually being louder than during the day, makes certain spaces more affective

through pauses and comparative moments of quiet. The soundtrack and kaleidoscope of light levels experienced through the night walks reveal different and new qualities of place, emphasizing characteristics that are barely discernible during the daytime. Further, when we draw people through a place via a range of spatial practices including night walking, cycling, tango, parkour, skateboarding, graffiti etc., it offers up different participants and different ways to come to know the city. One of the collective night walks taken as part of our practice and held on ²² February 2018 was documented in a short film, *Underline*, which conveys the atmospheres, ambiances and sensory experiences of the event.²² These night walks afford a loose choreography and a collective authorship of place. They do this through the inscriptive practice of people's temporary occupation and movement through space, enabling interaction and exchange. This evolves a shared sense of belonging and ownership, leading to a stronger connection with their city.

In summary, we are finding that our *Collaborative Urbanism* of collective night walking through space is enabling Glaswegians to imagine a new future and shape a new identity for the city. For example, as Danny, a skateboarder and one of the participants, explains in the film, 'personally I think it's great . . . all these different people I've met, I feel now that we can easily make things happen in the future'. Whilst Laura, another participant, shared the view 'they are thought of as sort of dead spaces at the moment, it's the kind of place we'd get lost in and think of that in a negative light, so to deliberately to be brought here is quite interesting'. This collective authorship is deliberately ad hoc, flexible and on the run, yet it is an approach that affords lingering, finding and celebrating what's hidden or lost. By experiencing the city's spaces at different times, different speeds, and within different lights and degrees of darkness, we intend to develop this inscriptive practice of collective authorship of urban space further in order that the residents of a city become more active and activating participants in its remaking.



Fig. 6. Stills from *Underline*, a short film made in collaboration with participants on a collective night walk around the underbelly of Glasgow's M8 motorway, 22 February 2018. © Dan Dubowitz.

- 1 In the UK the level of activism and awareness of urban development and engagement with processes of objection, etcetera, is extremely low compared with many of our European counterparts.
- 2 Raymond Depardon, *Glasgow* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2016), 6-7.
- 3 Ibid., 9.
- 4 <https://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/culture/art/raymond-depardon-photo-book-captures-glasgow-life-in-1980-1-4040621>, accessed 27 April 2018.
- 5 Ian Nairn, *Britain's Changing Towns* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1967), 61.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid., 84.
- 8 <http://www.glasgows-motorways.co.uk/m8-motorway/4588285335> [Accessed 27 April 2018] See also: Robert Bruce, *First Planning report to the Highways and Planning Committee of the Corporation of the City of Glasgow* (Glasgow: Glasgow Corporation Printing and Stationery Department, 1945).
- 9 See respectively: Molly Weir, *Shoes Were for Sundays* (London: Penguin Books, 1970) and Robert Douglas, *Night Song of the Last Tram* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2005).
- 10 Alexander McArthur and H. Kingsley Long, *No Mean City* (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1935).
- 11 Alasdair Gray, *Lanark* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1981).
- 12 See respectively: James Kelman, *How Late It Was, How Late* (London: Minerva, 1994) and Louise Welsh, *The Cutting Room* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2002).
- 13 Denise Mina, *Garnethill* (London: Hachette UK, 1998), 166. See also the crime fiction of Karen Campbell, a former police officer who has woven personal experiences and insights from working the streets of Glasgow into her novels, for example *The Twilight Time* (London: Hodder Paperbacks, 2008).
- 14 Gerry Hassan, Melissa Mean and Charlie Tims, *The Dreaming City: Glasgow 2020 and the Power of Mass Imagination* (London: Demos, 2007), 23.
- 15 Ibid., 205.
- 16 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 117.
- 17 Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (London: Routledge, 1995), 105.
- 18 Francesco Careri, *Walkscapes: Walking as an Aesthetic Practice* (Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 2002); Frédéric Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking* (London: Verso, 2014); Lauren Elkin, *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2016).

- 19 Ian Spring, 'The Secret Geometry of Glasgow', *Real Glasgow* (Bridgend: Seren, 2017), 26.
- 20 Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 175.
- 21 Nick Dunn, *Dark Matters: A Manifesto for the Nocturnal City* (New York: Zero Books, 2016), 11.
- 22 *Underline* film available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=opkTh9DhJcI>.